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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 007213

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SUBJECT: PRC/MEPP: PRC SUPPORTS ANNAPOLIS CONFERENCE, BUT
SEEKS MIDEAST ROLE TO ENHANCE NATIONAL INTERESTS

Classified By: Classified by Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs
Aubrey Carlson. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: China's decision to send Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi to the November 26-27 Annapolis conference on the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) demonstrates China's firm support for the international meeting, according to an MFA contact. Chinese public statements have played up the international nature of the meeting and, in particular, the importance of participation of Arab League countries, although our contact expressed some concern about the attendance of major Arab powers, and other contacts suggested that PRC expectations for the meeting are low. A prominent Middle East scholar told us that China views the MEPP as a vehicle for protecting traditional core interests, including ensuring strong economic links with the oil-exporting region and undermining the political support Chinese Muslims draw from the Middle East. END SUMMARY.

PRC "Supports" Annapolis Conference

¶2. (C) Drawing from talking points previously used by MFA spokesperson Liu Jianchao, MFA West Asian and North African Affairs Department Director Xiao Junzheng told Poloff November 23 that China "welcomes" the Annapolis conference as an important opportunity to move the Middle East toward "comprehensive, just and lasting" peace. China, he stressed, is supportive of the effort and, like many countries, hopes for a positive outcome. China's decision to send Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi to participate in the meeting is further reflective of China's interest in showing support for the conference. He stressed the need for a reduction in tensions between Israel and Palestine and expressed hope that the conference would serve to underscore the necessity for dialogue and negotiation between Israel and Palestine as the best means for resolving the long-standing conflict.

MFA Interested in Arab League Participation

¶3. (C) Xiao stressed the international nature of the conference, suggesting that the international show of support the meeting could generate would be an important outcome. He noted in particular that the participation of Arab League represents a potentially useful broadening of the peace process. Xiao also expressed keen interest in which Arab League countries in particular would attend, reflecting China's interest in the MEPP as a tool for developing closer ties with the broader Middle East region. He suggested that Egypt and Saudi Arabia may be reluctant to confirm their

participation.

Support for MEPP Driven by Need for Stronger Arab Relations

14. (C) Li Guofu, Director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the MFA-affiliated China Institute for International Studies (CIIS), told Poloff earlier that this growing interest in the Middle East, including through the MEPP, reflects Beijing's view that the region has direct relevance for core issues of Chinese national interest. China's need for strong relations with Arab countries, particularly oil-producing ones, he noted, explains Beijing's increasing interest in finding some constructive role to play in the MEPP, especially as Israel's Arab neighbors display more active diplomacy on the issue. Li added that "several Arab countries" directly appealed to China to play a more proactive role in the MEPP, and the appointment of Ambassador Sun Bigan as China's Special Envoy to the MEPP can be viewed as China's effort to respond positively to that call.

Ties to Middle East: A Means to Co-opt Domestic Opposition

15. (C) China's need for a stronger presence in the Middle East, in part through participation in the MEPP, can also be traced to the need for Beijing to maintain social stability and prevent extremism and terrorism within its own borders, Li emphasized. Arab countries, despite the distance that separates them from China's western provinces, remain an important and influential source of political inspiration for Muslim populations in the PRC, which Beijing views as a potential threat to stability. Beijing fears the threat of

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Muslim extremism within China, Li added, and ultimately sees dealing with this threat as critical for China's territorial integrity. Beijing seeks stronger ties with the Middle East, through outreach on the MEPP and other initiatives, in an effort to undermine or co-opt this Middle East support for Muslims in China.

Reward without the Risk

16. (C) China's attitude toward the MEPP, however, is fundamentally "low-risk," Li stressed, with China generally unwilling to take any bold measures that would compromise what Beijing sees as China's core interests. If the MEPP should bear fruit, Li noted, China's measured participation would bring credit to China and its growing foreign policy ambitions, but Beijing believes China will remain blameless should the MEPP fail. An Egyptian Embassy Political Officer told us November 21 in any case that China has low expectations for the conference. In his discussions, MFA officials made clear that China does not expect any dramatic progress at the conference, especially given the lack of participation of Hamas and the domestic political constraints of Israel.

China Wary of Friction with U.S. over Middle East?

17. (C) Embassy of Israel DCM DJ Schneeweiss told Poloff November 7 that the PRC's low-risk approach is further reflective of China's weighing its interests in the region with its relationship with the United States. Beijing continues to view the Middle East, Schneeweiss said, as a U.S. "sphere of influence," and involving itself too deeply in the MEPP could risk putting China into conflict with the United States. Schneeweiss noted in particular that China's Special Envoy to the MEPP lacks the mandate to bring any real Chinese commitment to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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